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TRADE IN HISPANIC WEAVINGS OF NORTHERN NEW MEXICO AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF TRADITION¹

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INTRODUCTION

No discussion of late 20th century trade in textiles - particularly trade in what has been called "regional" or "ethnic" textiles - would be complete without a discussion of the terms "traditional" and "authentic" for these terms inform even a lay person's evaluation of textiles on the market today.

As textile professionals, we encounter terms like "textile tradition," "traditional textiles" or even "authentic traditional textiles" in our everyday experience: a textile brought back by a collector from travel to a Third World nation or a textile on display in a museum. These textiles are subjected to discussions of their authenticity, of whether they represent a tradition. The authentic, traditional textile is often, either openly or implicitly, contrasted to the inauthentic, tourist textile. There is an assumption that we share a common understanding of the term "traditional textile."

However, a growing body of interdisciplinary literature from the fields of anthropology (Clifford, 1988; Dominguez, 1986; Handler and Linnekin, 1984), folklore (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1988; Bendix, 1989), history (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983) and sociology (Cohen, 1988) has challenged our commonsense understanding of what constitutes a tradition. In this emerging literature, traditions are viewed as "negotiable" (Cohen, 1988:374), "invented" (Hobsbawm and Ranger:1983) and "socially-constructed" (Handler and Linnekin:1984). Further, collected objects, formerly seen as the locus of interesting data about other cultures and their "authentic traditions" are now being reevaluated for what they can tell us about ourselves and our values. For example, the quest for authenticity in the objects we buy and study is seen as a sign of our own alienation (Cohen: *op. cit.*) or as a "means of preserving our own historicity" (Dominguez, 1986:548). As the terms "tradition" and "authenticity" have been scrutinized and deconstructed, long-held assumptions have given way.

What is meant by the social construction of tradition? Rather than viewing a tradition as a natural phenomenon, which existed in the past, tradition is viewed as a symbolic process. Shils noted in 1981 (195) that tradition is "capable of being retrospectively reformed by human beings in the present." Later, Handler and Linnekin (1984) wrote, "Tradition is a model of the past and is inseparable from the interpretation of tradition in the present...a symbolic process that both presupposes past symbolisms and creatively reinterprets them;" tradition is "...a process of interpretation, attributing meaning in the present through making reference to the past" (1984:276).

In the case of a textile tradition, what is passed on is not simply a product. The product is the physical manifestation of a tradition. Instead, what is passed on is what Shils (*ibid.*, 31) calls "the pattern which guides the reenactment," for our purposes, the

¹ This paper has been adapted for the Textile Society from a paper presented by the author at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, November, 1989, entitled "Collectors of Hispanic Weaving." The paper was part of a panel, "Collecting the Objects of Others."

particular constellation of materials, techniques, aesthetics, support systems, ways of learning, and so on, that determine the final product.

TWO VIEWS OF HISPANIC WEAVING TRADITION

Hispanic weaving of northern New Mexico provides a fitting example through which we might examine this changing view of tradition. What has been called the Hispanic weaving tradition has a long history as a trade item, first during Spanish colonial settlement of what is now the American Southwest. In the late 19th century, the sarape was transformed into a woven curio to meet the needs of mail order merchants and tourists. A range of Hispanic weaving continues to be traded in the Southwest today, to tourists and to public and private collectors as well.

Hispanic weaving assumes a place as one of the three great textile traditions of the American Southwest, alongside the Pueblo and Navajo traditions.² This Hispanic tradition has been described in popular and scholarly literature since the early decades of this century.³ However, in the course of my fieldwork in the Southwest, a different view of this Hispanic weaving tradition emerged, one which had been eclipsed in earlier works.

In the early stages of field work in the American Southwest where I observed and interviewed weavers, museum personnel, collectors, and dealers (at times not mutually exclusive categories, by the way), I was struck by the unclear connection between the 19th century Rio-Grande-style weaving and the contemporary Chimayó-style weaving. What was usually described as traditional New Mexican Hispanic weaving in the literature and what was exhibited in museums and promoted by art societies, was the older Rio-Grande-style blankets or reproductions of them. However, to the majority of Hispanic weavers I interviewed, Chimayó-style weaving was their tradition, what their parents and grandparents did: weaving for curio and blanket dealers. The discrepancy between these two visions arose, I felt, from the designation of Chimayó-style weaving as "tourist art," a body of work by and large rejected by the world of scholars and collectors as "inauthentic."

The published accounts concerning Hispanic settlement and the unfolding of Hispanic weaving in the American Southwest share certain features. First, in the majority of books and articles on the Hispanic settlement of New Mexico, emphasis has been placed on the transfer of European Hispanic culture to the New World: the pride in Spanish heritage, most evident in the "pure Spanish" language spoken, strongly medieval in flavor, and in the strong Catholic faith. In the case of weaving, the emphasis was placed on the sheep and the loom brought to the Southwest by the Spaniards during colonial times; on the predominance of male weavers using these bulky treadle looms, following the European tradition; and on the production of woven items for home use.

According to these accounts, Hispanic weaving died out in the 19th century when commercial blankets from the Eastern United States provided a cheap alternative to handwoven ones. "Adulterated" Hispanic weaving for the tourist market then appeared, with its "gaudy colors" and "shoddy commercial materials." The tradition was then "put back on track" in the 1920s and 1930s when Anglo immigrants to the Southwest formed art societies, such as the Spanish Colonial Art Society, to promote the revival of Native American and Hispanic traditions. They sponsored craft shops and had influence upon

² For a more complete, illustrated discussion of the history of Hispanic weaving see Baizerman (1987 and 1988).

³ Baizerman (1987) provides details of this literature with specific references.

federally-sponsored New Deal educational programs. Educated easterners in large part, they represented an American "translation" of the European Arts and Crafts movement and its ideology which had strongly supported a revival of crafts in the face of encroaching industrialization. Popular magazine articles of the times abounded with phrases typified by the following quotation: "they wove and sung at their weaving for it had been ever thus" (Clark, 1938:35). Emphasis in training programs and shop-output was placed on replicating designs of the antique presumably to achieve a "traditional" and "authentic" product. Resulting weavings were adaptations of 19th century Rio-Grande-style blankets, the originals of which art society members were collecting for their Southwestern homes. (These antiques are the weavings that appear in art museum collections today and are exchanged on the collectors' market.)

My own research involved the turn-of-the-century documents of curio dealers as well as secondary sources and field work with contemporary Hispanic weavers (including the hands-on study of Hispanic weaving). The results of my inquiry revealed some contrasts with these generally accepted accounts.

First of all, while there is an undeniable connection to European antecedents, there is an equally undeniable connection to New Spain as well. The link to Spain was not direct, but filtered through the "sieve" formed by the interlinked Spanish and Indian cultures in what was to become Mexico.

One such linkage was formed by intermarriage (or liaisons which produced bi-cultural offspring). As in Mexico, New Mexican Hispanics intermarried with the Native American population. Bustamante's work (1982) has pointed out the extent of such contacts with local Native American populations, overlooked in accounts which stress the purity of Spanish heritage.

Another link connecting the Southwest more directly to New Spain than to Spain is that of weaving. Like weavers all over Mexico, New Mexican weavers were providing sturdy blankets - most of them plain or with simple stripes - for miners and frontiersmen throughout Mexico. This was a major industry, part of a vast trading network, not simply a home craft. New Mexico was firmly tied to the rest of New Spain through trade links and the influence not only of Spanish culture but of the synthetic Mexican culture was apparent. This connection was particularly evident in the 19th century when a unique design system - the Saltillo sarape - influenced the visual design of blankets from Guatemala, throughout Mexico, and into northern New Mexico. The Saltillo sarape is said to have served as a symbol of Mexican independence during the Revolution (Jeter and Juelke:27). The Rio Grande blanket, thought to epitomize "traditional" northern New Mexican Hispanic weaving is a clear derivative of the Saltillo sarape and must have echoed its nationalistic message. In fact, northern New Mexican weaving fits quite convincingly into the Mexican sarape tradition as a regional variation.

Another questionable interpretation in published accounts is that weaving died out in the late 19th century. Blanket production surely declined, but weaving did not disappear. In rural areas, blankets continued to be produced as part of the yearly agricultural cycle where one aspect of living off the land involved the transformation of sheep wool into blankets. "New traditions," such as rag rug weaving, began as did weaving for the curio trade. Curio dealers were first peddlers with donkeys carrying goods to rural Native American and Hispanic villages. Later, these merchants set up shop in towns such as Santa Fe. Jake Gold, a German Jewish immigrant, was one such curio dealer. He was influential in transforming the Hispanic blanket into a small, transportable curio product. He procured yarn from Eastern U.S. woolen mills and supplied weavers with these yarns. He thereby established a cottage industry, a form of economic

organization well-suited to cash-poor rural Hispanic farmers of the day who wove in the winter when their agricultural duties were suspended. When Gold's life ended, Jesus Candelario, a Hispanic merchant who had worked with Gold, continued the business.

Candelario was an energetic and aggressive businessman who expanded the demand for Hispanic weaving by developing outlets for his line of curios all over the country. Best selling items were blankets, furniture-scarves, and pillow tops. They could be purchased across the U.S. As business increased, so too did Candelario's efforts to find new weavers, and yarns and looms for these weavers. While stress on European ties promoted the image of the male weaver working at his loom, there were many women who were involved in these home weaving enterprises.

Candelario capitalized on consumers' passion for goods relating to the American Indian and on their lack of knowledge about Indian crafts. He includes Hispanic weaving in his "Starter for an Indian Corner" available for \$5.00. Hispanic weavers were referred to the "Chimayós," suggesting a tribe of Indians. Customers ordered Chimayó blankets with designs "emblematical of true Indian characteristics." Swastika designs, ironically touted by curio dealers as the Indian good luck symbol, were in great demand. Customers also made special orders for lodge symbols, business names, college names to be woven into blankets.

By the teens, another distinctive design system emerged. Often credited to the imagination of the Santa Fe curio dealers, it may have been introduced by a Mexican weaver who emigrated to the United States and trained many weavers in the Santa Fe area. In the 1920s and 1930s, automobile travel to northern New Mexico made it possible for rural Hispanic entrepreneurs, usually general-merchandise-store-owners who had worked for Candelario, to develop as blanket dealers in their home turf. These small souvenir pieces and larger blankets, while not collected by art connoisseurs, have worked their way into the collections of historical societies and natural history museums all across the country.

The curio and blanket dealers had solved the problems of organizing production and distribution. Yet in Santa Fe, the shops set up by Anglos to promote the revival of 19th century Rio-Grande-style weaving were beset by problems. The foremost problem was that they were trying to market a more labor-intensive product than a twentieth century economy could support. Shops had constant financial difficulties and survived only with the generous subsidy of patrons of the art. Paradoxically, the forms of weaving considered more traditional and aesthetically pleasing by revivalists were out of the price range and taste range of the majority of consumers.

The legacy of the early years of the century is present today. There are still both markets, that geared to the tourist trade and that to the collector market. It is noteworthy that there are more than a few weavers who produce for both markets: one weaver concentrates on making coasters by the hundreds, then weaves fine tapestries which are shown in art galleries. Other weavers have begun their weaving careers by working for the tourist market, then have "graduated" to the fine art market. To weavers there is a continuity between one type of weaving and another.

For weavers there also seems to be a sense of continuity between 19th century blanket weaving and later weaving done for the tourist trade. The organization of production of blanket caravans, with a central patron involved in distribution of raw materials to weavers and distribution of blankets to consumers, is replicated with the curio and blanket dealers, still a remarkably stable, cottage industry system today thanks in large part to the depressed economic conditions of northern New Mexico.

In summary, then, what developed in the published accounts of Hispanic weaving and what is reflected in certain collecting activities has stressed a more European, less Mexican type of weaving tradition, a more male than family-centered type of weaving, a stress on weaving for home use rather than commercial ventures, a stress on Spanish rather than mixed-descent, a recognition of weavers' efforts as fine artists, ignoring their simultaneous or previous history with the tourist market. The published versions of the development of Hispanic weaving sidestepped the way in which the Hispanic culture in New Mexico has been affected by Mexican, Native American and Anglo as well as European Spanish influences and has synthesized elements of all of them.

A BROADER CONTEXT FOR THE HISPANIC WEAVING TRADITION

I wanted to consider these contrasting schemes of development within a larger framework. I considered the literature on "tourist art." Typologies, such as those of Nelson Graburn (1976), divided the phenomena I was viewing in an artificial way, unnaturally uncomplicated, very much dependent on viewer evaluation using, to describe the range of tourist art, terms such as "functional/traditional," "reintegrated," "commercial fine art," "assimilated fine art." I sought a model which would place Hispanic weaving in a broader social context.

To some extent Clifford's (1988) "art-culture system" provided this. His is a fluid system where an object might be transformed in a given span of time from curio to ethnographic artifact to fine art object. However, Clifford places at the center of concern the issue of "authenticity," even calling his model "a machine for making authenticity." I was not as concerned with the issue of authenticity for I sensed that authenticity tends to become a concern for the producer in interaction with the consumer. However, authenticity is chiefly a consumer, not a producer preoccupation. I was concerned with placing the various kinds of craft production into one unified whole, the way they appeared to be viewed from inside the culture. Building on the work of Becker (1982) and Jules-Rosette (1984), I coined the terms "boundary art" and "boundary art world." The specification of the term "boundary" places the emphasis on transactions between ethnic groups.

BOUNDARY ART WORLD

The boundary art world of Hispanic weaving consists of Hispanic weavers, consumers who purchase their weaving across a hypothetical boundary and the agents who mediate the exchange between the two, such as curio dealers, art gallery owners, and museum professionals. In the case of Hispanic weaving in the Southwest, the economics of the boundary art world result in various market segments, stratified along price lines. The lower end of the scale represents sales to tourists and is geared to the taste of popular culture. (I might remind you that "Southwest style" and "Santa Fe style" surround us today, from coffee-table books and decorator magazines to discount store ads in the Sunday supplement.)

The high end of the price scale of Hispanic weaving represents sales to the fine art market (including museums) and is geared to a "high taste culture," composed of educated, professional, upper-middle and upper class people, as described by Gans (1974). Within this scheme, tourist art fits into a larger context of artistic production.

It is within this boundary art world that negotiations about what defines "tradition" and what is "authentic" take place. At both ends of the price continuum, consumers in the boundary art world within which Hispanic weaving is exchanged have influenced the final product. Curio and tourist art consumers have required a portable, tangible, inexpensive metonym, as MacCannell (1976) has called it, for the American Southwest. Authenticity of

the object has not been subjected to scrutiny. Through their specific requests consumers have helped curio and blanket dealers to shape products to meet consumer needs. (The word "shape" is important here because control of the final product remains in the hands of the weaver.)

On the fine art market, the consumer has also influenced the appearance of the woven item - with the added power-to-influence which results when the economic stakes are higher. This power could be harnessed unwittingly to define "tradition" to suit the collectors' and curators' own vision. For the collector of fine art or folk art, authenticity becomes a more important factor and the consumer appears to have a more vested interest in defining authenticity in his or her own terms.

To the high taste culture, Rio-Grande-style weaving was a better aesthetic "fit" than was Chimayó-style weaving. It fit aesthetic values made manifest in visual images and color relationships. Further, the social circumstances of the production of Chimayó-style weaving -- a cottage industry using commercially-manufactured materials -- had little romantic appeal, colorful curio dealers notwithstanding. In the name of authenticity, labor intensive techniques, especially handspinning, were reintroduced by Anglo *aficionados*. If we agree with Virginia Dominguez (1986:554) that what we collect and the way we go about it tells us something about ourselves, what does the reintroduction of handspinning, for example, tell us about those who promoted and collected this form of authentic handweaving? First it speaks to what she calls the "act of creation" that is involved in collecting. The high taste culture created and nurtured an image of Spanish colonial life and activity.

The created image led to both positive and negative outcomes. On the one hand, the image of Spanish colonial life stimulated Hispanic weavers as well as consumers of their products. It provided a positive reflection in an era noted for its prejudice against Mexicans, hence, emphasis on Spanish antecedents.

On the other hand, there is a dark side to this created image of Spanish colonial life which stems from the control which is implicit in the "act of creation." A skewed picture has been created one not congruous with that held by those who are the "owners" of the tradition. It was not just the fine art market which promoted and ensured the survival of Hispanic weaving. It was also the tourist market, unromantic as some might consider it, which has consistently been interlinked with the fine art market and the survival of Hispanic weaving. An understanding of tourist art within a boundary art world of producers, consumers, and mediators enriches our understanding of Hispanic weaving.

Are there other negative aspects to the "invention of tradition?" From the darkest perspective, the push for certain preferences by collectors, such as the reintroduction of handspinning and hand dyeing, may serve to reproduce the colonial hegemony where rural Hispanos remain economically depressed, since the amount of time that goes into labor intensive chores like handspinning and hand-dyeing can rarely be adequately compensated. In addition, museum collections may more adequately make a statement about the values of collectors of a certain taste culture than about weavers or their craft.

CONCLUSION

All over the world crafts are being transformed by outside markets at an alarming rate. We need only compare regional or ethnic textiles imported to the United States five years ago with those of today. For one, they are ubiquitous. They appear to have less time invested in their manufacture. However, while we may personally mourn the loss of fine warp/weft counts and the rash of large-scale, simplified design motifs, our scholarly curiosity should be challenged by the opportunity to study these changes and the meanings

they have for producers, consumers and the strata of dealers who mediate between them in these boundary art worlds.

We must acknowledge that in our dedication to work with textiles and in our association with museums and universities, we are subject to unique pressures. We work in highly politicized worlds where dealers and collectors serve on museum boards and otherwise sustain museum activities with generous donations. And we are seen as experts: like it or not we play a key role in the social construction of tradition and in questions of authenticity.

An examination of the social construction of tradition might lead us to subject the world of individual and institutional collecting to the same scrutiny and the same reflexivity to which other topics are subject. It might lead us in our professional roles to work towards aesthetic pluralism, aware of if not actively supporting equal validity to varieties of material culture expressions which are subsumed under the heading "boundary art."

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